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A Poetry Reading in Diyarbakir

1.

I was too caught up in the euphoria of the moment to imagine that the two men who hosted my poetry reading in Diyarbakir would be in exile or prison two years later, and that the entire old quarter of the city would be destroyed only months after our departure. May 2015 was a spirited time to be in Diyarbakir, the Kurdish center of Turkey in the southeast. It was a moment of hope for democracy in Turkey and for Kurdish rights after decades of violence and suppression. My visit to Diyarbakir to give a reading with the Kurdish poet Kawa Nemir in the centennial year of the Armenian Genocide meant that I would read and discuss the story of my family's mass murder and expulsion from their historic homeland. A few years earlier such an idea would have been absurd, especially given the laws and taboos in Turkey. And the 2007 assassination of Armenian human rights activist and journalist Hrant Dink midday in downtown Istanbul still hovered. But that spring, traveling with my family on a pilgrimage to historic Armenia in eastern Turkey, I felt hopeful about the new winds of democracy.

There was a cultural revolution happening here—in a country where in the first years of the twenty-first century it was still illegal to use the word *Kurdish* in public; where Kurdish dress, schools, and radio had been outlawed. There were fifteen million Kurds, a quarter of the population of Turkey, the largest ethnic minority in the country and the largest stateless ethnic group in the world, and they

were forced by law to call themselves “mountain Turks.” As a result of decades of Kurdish civil rights struggle, some liberalizing forces in Turkey, and pressure from Europe in the wake of Turkey’s then-hoped-for admission to the EU, President Recep Erdoğan and his government assented to legalizing the Kurdish language, radio, and traditional dress. But amid this new energy in the streets—the Turkish state was ubiquitous. Army jeeps, soldiers with automatic rifles, police on street corners. And the green metal fence of the military base just a few yards from our hotel driveway seemed to stretch for miles. In this tinderbox, the Kurds that we met greeted us with a mix of delight and desperation, as if to say, Glad to see you—and don’t leave us here alone.

The dirty war between the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and the Turkish government has claimed between 30,000 and 40,000 Kurds and no doubt thousands of Turkish soldiers since the mid-1980s. The assault on the Kurdish movement since the summer of 2015 has resulted in the razing of 4,000 villages throughout the southeast as well as the displacement of between 400,000 and a million people. The Diyarbakir prison—one of the worst in the world—is a place of torture, murder, and numerous suicides of young Kurdish men.

I’ve imagined Diyarbakir for much of my life because it was the home of my maternal grandparents’ families for centuries and the site of their mass murder in 1915 during the Armenian Genocide. The city and the vilayet of the same name were an epicenter of Armenian massacre since 1895, when the first rounds of killings began during the Sultan Abdulhammit era. In 1915, Diyarbakir was a killing field as extreme as any in Turkey because the provincial governor Mehmed Reshid was as fanatical about eradicating the Armenians from Turkey as the architect of the Armenian Genocide himself—Minister of the Interior Talaat Pasha.

My grandmother was the only survivor of her large, wealthy merchant family, the rest of whom were taken from their homes by Kurdish killing squads and killed in the first days of August 1915. Her nieces and nephews as young as two years old, her sisters and brothers and in-laws, and her parents were all among the 120,000 Armenians—a third of the population of the vilayet—who were murdered or marched out. My grandmother, Nafina, was the young-

est of her siblings, and she survived the death march into the Syrian desert with her two infant daughters, Zivart (Gladys) and Arshalois (Alice). Her first husband, Hagop Chilinguirian, died on the march, somewhere in that desert. By September 1915 they were refugees in a famine- and disease-ravaged part of Aleppo, where Nafina worked as a seamstress for the next five years as she accrued the funds to depart for the United States. In Paterson, New Jersey, which she reached by way of Ellis Island, she married my grandfather, Bedros Aroosian. They had two daughters, Lucille and my mother Arax.

We were on a pilgrimage: my mother, sisters, brother, daughter, son, son-in-law, cousins, and two friends traveling with two extraordinary guides, Armen Aroyan and Annie Katchekian, Armenian-Americans from Los Angeles who'd taken hundreds of groups to historic Armenia in eastern Turkey. As we entered Diyarbakir in our white Mercedes van, I could feel the ghosts of the past. It was a city of nightmares. Corpses floating in the Tigris. Goat-skin rafts on fire. Women abducted along the roadsides in the blistering sun. Piles of broken glass. Burning houses and shops. Children trapped inside the caverns and grottos embedded within the city's ancient walls. Armenian country villas, farms, and houses all confiscated by the military police.

A big blue road sign read "Welcome to Diyarbakir" in Kurdish, Turkish, Armenian, and Asori, something that would have been unthinkable until now. The city's mayor, Osman Baydemir, a human rights activist and HDP member, and other brave Kurdish political leaders like Selahattin Demirtaş had spent that past decade turning Diyarbakir into the center of Kurdish culture in Turkey. There seemed hope for a new age of peace and democracy in a country with one of the worst human rights records over the past forty years; hope for this largest ethnic minority, which had been seeking cultural freedom and participation in government for decades. Our van pulled into the driveway of a glistening white Hilton, and I stepped out into the dry hot air and gazed down about 300 feet to the brown water of the Tigris and the green of the surrounding farmland. Then I pivoted to see, a few feet away, the barbed wire fence surrounding the massive military base, which enclosed jeeps and soldiers with rifles. Ancient city, river, farmlands,



The Tigris River in Diyarbakir, Turkey
Photo: Armen Marsoobian

barbed wire, military base, tourist hotel. Would I be able to find my grandparents' lost world?

After check-in we were back in the van heading to the black basalt city walls. Built by the Romans around 297 CE, thirty feet high, they circle Diyarbakir for more than five miles, making them among the longest intact city walls in the world. At the top of thirty-five narrow stone steps, we walked out onto a huge piazza and looked down at the Tigris and the bronze light coating the fields beyond. By evening we were walking the narrow cobblestone streets of the old city, where spice shops and dry goods stores were bustling with people. Smoke from grilling kebabs, stalls with mounds and bins of nuts, dried fruits, and spices. Shop awnings hanging with strings of dried eggplants and peppers, herbs, seekjooks, bastermas. Men and women in traditional dress—vests, turbans, waist buns, gold belts, turquoise hats, red sashes, purple gowns, amber necklaces. The ubiquitous yellow-and-green triangular flags of the Kurdish Peace Party (HDP) strung across streets and squares. I was expecting a backwater like the cities of Kars and Elizag, but here were crowds, lights, dancing and singing in public—the anticipation of a new future with an HDP victory in the coming election.

We pressed Armen for dinner at a local place, and he ushered us to a second-floor restaurant with big windows looking out on the lights and shops. Our table was soon piled with plates of pickled vegetables, boiled onions smeared with hot pepper, Kurdish salsa, and baskets of hot pitas and crisp, spicy lamajeunes—the best we had had in Turkey. Then came plates of hot dolmas: rice-and-lamb-stuffed eggplant, peppers, tomatoes, zucchini—with coriander, cumin, allspice, and a hit of Aleppo red pepper. Coriander-and-garlic-smeared lamb patties and chicken kebabs, piles of charred peppers, bowls of steaming bulgur, and pitchers of tahn—that ubiquitous Anatolian beverage of yogurt, water, and mint. A riot of flavors that brought me back to my grandmother’s kitchen.

In the morning the breakfast buffet was piled with chores and braided, egg-washed breads, za’atar bread, apricot, cherry, quince, and mulberry jams, honeycombs, olives, pickled vegetables, black-seeded twist cheese—and we ate watching the sun flaring on the Tigris. By noon I was sitting with the poet Lal Lalesh, the historian Sheymus Dikan, and the philanthropist Osman Kavala in the courtyard of the Armenian Surp (Saint) Giragos church, beautifully restored by local



Kurdish Peace Party (HDP) flags shortly before the 2015 election
Photo: Armen Marsoobian

Kurdish and diasporan Armenian communities working together, another manifestation of the cultural revival here. It remains the largest Armenian church in the Middle East and an impressive stone-vaulted structure with a bell tower—a miraculous resurrection of the Armenian past. We drank black tea from glass cups, surrounded by trimmed hedges and stone sculptures.

Kavala, who'd brought us together as part of his work promoting democracy, had done more perhaps than any single person in Turkey to get ethnic groups talking across fraught barriers. Everyone knew that Diyarbakir's killing squads in 1915 were composed largely of Kurds. It wasn't a subject we discussed, but it hung over the table. Like the intrepid Turkish publisher Ragip Zarakolu, who for decades had risked his life publishing books (including mine) on and by minority writers—Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks, Kurds, on taboo subjects—Kavala seemed fearless. He was an educator, benefactor to artists, and promoter of human rights and civil society within the complex mosaic of Turkey. An old nationalist lawyer once said to me, "He's taught us a lot about who we are."

Dikan led us on a tour of the old quarter—down narrow cobblestone streets where I pictured the dry goods shops of my great-uncles Dikran and Hariutiun, and in and out of cafés and stores—pointing out fashionable restaurants that had once been stately Armenian houses. On the eve of the genocide, Diyarbakir was a multicultural city of priests and hojas, mullahs and rabbis milling around the brown and white stone bathhouses, churches, mosques, and synagogues. Kurds, Armenians, Turks, Syrians, Assyrians, Greeks, Jews, and Europeans. A cosmopolitan city at the crossroads. As Dikan introduced us to shopkeepers and restaurant owners, we were greeted with words that shocked us: "Whatever we have is yours," "Everything in our city is yours," "Welcome back," "This land is your land." It was a reversal of what we'd experienced in the interior cities of Kars and Elizag, where we felt we were being watched like dangerous intruders. I kept recalling my friend Nevert from Istanbul: "In Turkey, there is no group more hated than the Armenians. Next," she said, "come the Greeks, then the Jews, and then the Kurds and the Alevi." President Erdoğan confirmed this when he expressed his indignation at the opposition party: "They said even uglier things," he ranted. "They called me an Armenian." But in Diyarbakir the

affection expressed by the Kurds was disarming, especially since their ancestors had participated in the killing and plundering of their Armenian neighbors.

Just weeks before our trip, my aunt discovered some lost pages among my grandmother's papers. Of August 1, 1915, she wrote:

It was a hot summer day and the burning sun had withered the green meadows and the flowers were fading. It was as if even nature was saying something to us about our fate; it was that day when the black veil covered our family. It was just midnight when we heard the advancing feet of the gendarmes and the faint clang of swords which in the silence of the night filled us with terror. And then a barbaric Kurdish group of gendarmes appeared with their mules. The chief gendarme was armed from head to toe, dressed magnificently, and he turned to his snorting horse and ordered the guards who were standing at our front door to be ready to deport all of us within the hour. They were putting us in a caravan of about twenty families.

If you've studied the Armenian Genocide, you know the Turkish government employed a divide-and-conquer policy, aware that the Kurds could be encouraged to help eliminate the Armenians because they would then assume dominance of the region and the wealth they plundered would be theirs. I imagined the Kurds around me had a general understanding of their ancestors' role in the killing of Armenians and the appropriation of their stores and homes. Much of this city's wealth—as was true of many parts of Turkey—had been built on the booty of murdered Armenian communities. And because there was so much rape and abduction—at least 200,000 Armenian women and children were kidnapped across Turkey—today many Kurdish and Turkish families across Anatolia have an Armenian grandmother.

The Kurds we met seemed to be aware of the ironies embedded in the expulsion of the Armenians in 1915 and the new freedom Armenians have found in their adopted home countries and in the Republic of Armenia. Unlike the fewer than 50,000 Armenians left in Turkey, the rest of the world's eight million Armenians were no longer *gavur* (infidels), hated Christians, resented and stereotyped as money-hungry professionals and merchants, dangerous “microbes,” as the Young Turk regime called them in 1915, when they were said

to be infecting the body politic of the Turkish nation. I could sense the strange envy the Kurds had of us. Envy with a pinch of guilt. They had become the new Armenians, the hated minority.

2.

In the hotel lobby, the poet Kawa Nemir sat waiting for me. A hip-looking guy around forty with a dark beard and thick black hair, he had mentioned the day before that he'd translated a couple of dozen British and American poets into Kurdish. I thought he meant a couple of dozen poems. But from his satchel he pulled a stack of bilingual editions of his Kurdish translations of Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Stephen Crane, Sara Teasdale, Shakespeare's sonnets, and more. I felt buoyed up by Nemir's books, his knowledge, his immersion in poetry. Finding a fellow poet 8,000 miles from home reminded me that the fellowship of literature is universal. Nemir put the books in my hands. "Please, they're for you."

Ten feet from the window of the popular Gabo Kitchen, the only vegan café in the city, I was jolted by a large poster announcing the reading with my face and Nemir's. Was this the city where my grandmother's family was massacred a hundred years ago? Were these the streets of blood and screams and death? We walked into the café, with its espresso bar and glass cases of pastry and sandwiches, and it could have been Greenwich Village. Reality and dream floating into each other. I felt out of place and time. The café was packed with young and old in jeans and T-shirts, scarves and bandanas, drinking espresso and beer, eating sandwiches. Journalists with tape recorders stood along one wall. Osman Kavala, tall and thin with a bushy beard and a head of curly hair, was leaning quietly against the bar, as if to be as invisible as possible. A protector of peace, a lover of community, he was there to make sure everything would go smoothly.

In the photos I'm looking at to reconstruct the evening, I see Nemir in a tan polo shirt and khaki chinos, his hair glistening in the overhead light. I'm in a black silk short-sleeve and black jeans, leaning over the reading table with a mike. On the wall behind us is a huge photograph of Gabriel Garcia Marquez in a chair, reading *One*



A historic reading advertised in the window at Gabo Kitchen
 Photo: Lynn Derderian

Hundred Years of Solitude. Nemir and I decided I would read half a dozen poems—he would translate every two stanzas—and he would close with a few of his own.

I try to avoid eye contact with my family in the front rows, because I can see their wide-eyed focus on me—amplifying a fear that something bad will happen. “What’s to stop the Turkish police from throwing us all in jail,” my brother repeated at breakfast. In the photo he stands against the glass facade at the back of the café looking tentative.

In both Kurdish and English, Nemir addresses an audience that is now spilling into the street. He looks at my family and says, “This land is your land, and this city is yours.” Then continues to everyone else: “Our friends and comrades are coming to see their forefather’s homeland, please welcome them.” A round of applause. “We are honored to have with us here in our city the poet Peter Balakian,” and then more applause and more effusive declarations by Nemir.

What hits me then is the probable fact that no other poet from the English-speaking world has ever given a reading in Diyarbakir, certainly not since 1922 when the Turkish Republic began. Even more bizarre, an Armenian-American poet at a politically complex time. The glare of the hanging lamps and the evening sun turn the room a surreal orange, and I remind myself again that I'm in Kurdistan, Turkey, historic Armenia, southeast Anatolia.

Back in Hamilton, New York, I listen to my reading on the iPhone recording my sister Pam made that night. "I have dreamed about this place and written about this place for decades. I did not expect to find what I found here today. If you had told me that I would come to Diyarbakir a hundred years after my grandmother's family were mass-murdered, to read with a Kurdish poet, I'd have told you—you were dreaming.

"A hundred years ago today my grandmother's family were living their lives here where their families had lived for centuries. Today my mother, Arax, is in the audience. She is the youngest of my grandmother's four daughters and was born in America after my grandmother survived massacre and deportation from her home. She was the only survivor of a large prosperous family." I hand the mike over to Nemir, who says it in Kurdish.

I read a group of poems from an early book of mine, *Sad Days of Light*—poems that deal with the "Old Country," memory, lost culture, and my grandmother's violent past. It's early work, but these feel right for the moment.

For My Grandmother Coming Back

For the dusty rugs
And the dye of blue-roots
For the pale red stomachs of sheep,
You come back.

For the brass ladle
And the porous pot of black
From your diner of fires
I call your name like a bird.

For the purple fruit

For the carrots like cut fingers
For the riverbed damp
With flesh,
You come back.

For the field of goats
wet and gray,
for the hooves and sharp bones
floating in the broth,
I wave my arms full of wind.

For the tumbling barrel
of red peppers,
for the milled mountain of wheat,
for the broken necks
of squash fat and full of seed,
I let my throat open.

For the lips of young boys
bitten through,
for the eyes of virgins brown
and bleating on the hill,

for the petticoat of your daughter
shivering by the lake,
for the yarn of her arms
unwinding at her father's last shout.

For the lamb punctured
from the raw opening
to his red teeth,
for the lamb rotating
like the sun
on its spit,
for the eyes that fall
into the fire,
for the tongue tender and full,
for the lungs smoldering
like leaves
and the breasts spilling
like yellow milk
and the stomach heaving

its fistful of days
like red water falling
into the stream,

I wave my arms full of birds
full of dry gusts
full of burning clothes,
and you come back,
you come back.

I then read an excerpt from the human rights lawsuit that my grandmother filed against the Turkish government in 1920 after arriving in the U.S., which my publisher reproduced in facsimile in my memoir, *Black Dog of Fate*. Nemir reads it in Kurdish, translating from the Turkish edition of the book.

Q/ 63 read: at 1 August 1915 our parish in Diyarbakir was besieged by the gendarmes. . . . the same day with the menace of death they removed us the Armenians. . . . after three days' journey they killed one by one the man deportees, of whom only a few were saved. So were mercilessly killed my brothers and sisters. . . . For thirty-two days we were obliged to wander through mountains and valleys. Hunger and fatigue enforced by the whip of the cruel gendarmes, diminished the number of the deportees. After many dangers whose descriptions would take much time, a few women and children, myself included, arrived at Aleppo, Syria, in the beginning of September 1915."

I look over at Nemir and wonder how he's dealing with this. Earlier I asked him if it was okay to read those lines, and he smiled and said, "Of course," but I'm still feeling anxious for him. There's no way for me to assess how much danger he's in doing this.

The audience is quiet as I read several more poems. Nemir finishes with a poem of his own and one by the Greek poet Yannis Ritsos.

As I sit listening, I wonder how he's able to live a life of poetry in a place like this. How soft my world is, with its sabbatical leaves, grants, summers at writers' conferences and artist colonies. Do we American writers think enough about what Kurdish, Chinese, Syrian, or Myanmar writers have to do to write?

I want to ask Nemir what it means to be translating Emily Dickinson and Shakespeare into Kurdish in the crossfire of the Turkish



The audience at the café, with Balakian's mother, Arax, at front right
Photo: Lynn Derderian

military, but I'm whisked to a table crowded with journalists. For the next hour they pelt me with questions as I keep looking at the door to see if there's anything to be worried about, but there's only the warm night air, the scent of jasmine, and sounds of Kurdish music. The room buzzes with crowd noise and espresso cups, and I'm answering the best I can in the face of this frenetic energy, emphasizing that "whatever you feel about your culture and its history you have to make art out of it—as Garcia Marquez did." They all nod and grin. Then Nemir takes the mike and says some things in Kurdish, and a journalist asks how my mother feels being in her mother's home city where "the tragedy happened." "Ask her," I say. "She's here."

Arax, my 87-year-old mother, in a black sweater, silver necklace, and black pants, takes a seat at the table. The journalist asks her again with great intensity, "How does it feel to be in your mother and father's home city where the tragedy happened?" My mother stares ahead, but says nothing. Finally she gestures my way: "Ask Peter. He has the answers." After several seconds, I say quietly to her, "They want to hear from you, Mom." She's silent a few moments more, then says, "I

don't have anything to add." We look around the table and again she says, "Peter will tell you what you need to know." My mother, who is neither shy nor taciturn, and is known for slinging her barbs against social injustice and conservative policies, remains silent. The image of her has stayed with me: coiffed, chestnut-dyed hair; her fair, freckled, high cheekbones; her impassive eyes staring through her glasses.

I gaze at her for a while and realize that maybe her silence is an answer, and perhaps even a message. Her return to the site of the crime has put her in a place that seems to be, in this moment, beyond language. Twenty Kurdish journalists, amped up by their own sorrow and rage from living in Turkey, wait in anticipation of my mother's words. And my mother has no words.

My mother was raised by two survivor parents and had two half-sisters who'd also survived the deportation and massacres. Her father, Bedros Aroosian, had fled Diyarbakir after the bloodbath of the 1895–96 massacres. Over the years I've tried to imagine what my mother ingested, deflected, ducked, and endured growing up in that house with two parents whose families had been mass-murdered. My mother knew why she had no grandparents, no aunts or uncles or cousins on her mother's side. But she once told me she'd never asked a question about any of it. My mother was not a survivor, but she was what the trauma scholar Cathy Caruth has called "a symptom of history," and carried in her something unspeakable, a silence transmitted to her by deeply traumatized parents.

I tell the journalists that the pain of the past makes it difficult for her to speak, and as the interview breaks up, my mother starts exhorting me to leave pronto because we have a reservation at a special restaurant in the new part of the city and everyone is hungry. Isn't that also a survivor response? Faced with such a history, what better thing to do than eat. Pile the table with kebabs and pilaf and dolmas, and raise a glass to good health—ganatset, le chaim, skol, votre sante. It had been a longer day than we knew.

3.

Four days later, back home in my college town with its white steepled churches and manicured town green, I saw the newsflash

on my TV screen: a bomb had exploded in the center of Diyarbakir. It was Friday, June 5th. It went off at a rally of the HDP two days before the general election, killing five and injuring a hundred. No one took responsibility, but the Kurds saw it as a terrorist act by the Turkish government. Just as the HDP was on the verge of winning a participatory presence in the Turkish parliament by getting ten percent of the national vote, President Erdoğan started a new war against the Kurds, thus ending two years of peace negotiations with the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK). It didn't seem coincidental that the Turkish state chose war at a moment of great hope for Kurdish rights and a more inclusive democracy.

To read a timeline of the violence that the Turkish military unleashed on the Kurdish population in the east and southeast is to read a narrative of the wanton destruction of Kurdish towns and villages. Over the next two years, air strikes devastated southeastern Turkey; PKK guerillas fought back, killing Turkish soldiers and police; and while power was grossly asymmetrical, the PKK's retaliation gave Ankara its rationale for carrying out a reign of terror "under a pretext of reprisal against rebellion," to remember a phrase that Ambassador Morgenthau used in reporting on the genocide of the Armenians in 1915.

Between 2017 and 2020, Turkey's Human Rights Association estimates, fifty-two curfews were imposed on seven Kurdish towns where 1.3 million people live, sometimes lasting two weeks and causing civilian deaths. As many as 200,000 people were displaced by these tactics. The local gendarmerie targeted civilians under a pretext of fighting terrorism, and almost the entirety of Sur—that extraordinary old quarter where we felt the buzz of a cultural revival—was bombed, burned, and bulldozed. Everything we had walked through that day was now rubble. The Armenian church, though still standing, was damaged.

As I look through images of the destroyed Sur district on the internet, I see old Diyarbakir in ruins. The rubble of smashed shops and houses. Streets piled with mangled steel and broken glass. Kurdish people walking dazed, with grief on their faces. Then I picture Kawa Nemir at the mike with pages of poetry in his hand, the evening light on his face; I picture Osman Kavala leaning on the espresso bar, smiling as he listened to poems in Kurdish and English.

What happened to Nemir and Kavala is emblematic of the new era of brutal repression in Turkey. In the wake of the failed coup in summer 2016, President Erdoğan fired thousands of teachers, journalists, academics, and activists and imprisoned them on baseless charges of sedition. With the recommencing of war, publishing Kurdish books became impossible and even owning them could be grounds for arrest. After being harassed and surveilled by the police, Nemir fled Turkey in 2018 for Amsterdam, where he is founding a new center for Kurdish literature.

Kavala, the visionary cultural leader and trailblazer, who brought Kurds and Armenians together that night as he'd brought together so many ethnic groups in Turkey, was arrested in October 2017. He had used his inheritance from his family's business empire to bridge the long divides of history, creating programs and institutions that promoted multiculturalism, democracy, tolerance, and human rights. His Anadolu Kulture, a nonprofit based in a four-story complex in Istanbul's Beyoglu section, was devoted to organizing programs for cultural diversity, civil society, and the recovery of the minority cultures of the former Ottoman Empire. His courage was as unassuming as his grace and generosity. Arrested in the crackdown after the 2016 coup attempt on baseless charges of treason tied to the Gezi Park protests of 2013, he was subjected to a trial that was a sham and an affront to democracy, and has been in prison ever since. The man who had done so much to bring hope and a bit of progressive change to his country was now a victim of the same totalitarian structures he had tried to reform.

4.

We had made our pilgrimage. We had walked the old quarter with a sense of amazement and even delight. I had imagined our ancestors' lives on those streets before the catastrophe. We had been embraced by the Kurdish people we met; whatever their complex motivations, they were warm and embracing and it was an unexpected affirmation. My cousin Lynn had even performed her own sacred ritual at the altar in Saint Giragos, where she placed photographs of her mother, aunt Gladys, and our grandmother and a

beautiful photo in sepia of my grandmother’s slain brothers, sister, and nieces. She lit candles, said a prayer, and left the photos there under the altar cloth. We all watched from a distance. Later she told me, “It was a spontaneous impulse. I wanted to return them to their place of birth.”

I left Turkey feeling a surge of positive energy, only to see within days of our return—that hopeful moment dissolve into a repetition of the violent history of Turkey’s assault on human rights and multiculturalism. When the bomb went off on June 5th, I realized the Turkish government was up to its old tricks. Any progress that a minority group might make would be slammed back by the state. For the next year I watched the ruin and destruction on TV, on the internet, and in newspapers. I felt I was witnessing the endless return of a horrible history in Turkey, where the government’s assault on and persecution of ethnic minorities is an ongoing theme. In 1915 it was the Armenians, Syriac Christians, and Greeks. Now it’s the Kurds. My cousin Lynn, looking at the ruin and ruins, said, “I felt anger, shock, and heartbreak.” And then Osman Kavala was arrested and imprisoned, and Kawa Nemir fled for his life—tragic embodiments of the renewed climate of repression.



Saint Giragos, the largest Armenian church in the Middle East
Photo: Armen Marsoobian

In that strange interlude in the spring of 2015, I was able to read poems with a Kurdish poet in a celebratory atmosphere, in a city, and country, that was haunted for us as for all Armenians. The fact of a poetry reading. An occasion for gathering and thinking and listening. I was the fortunate one—a poet allowed to read in a place that had been the bloodbath of his ancestors. “The reading was a moment of community across cultural lines,” my cousin Lynn said later. Indeed, we had a moment of community that day in the café—Kawa Nemir, Osman Kavala, Lal Lalesh, Sheymus Dikan, the journalists, Kurdish citizens, and my Armenian family. We listened to poems in Kurdish, Turkish, and English. The day even seemed to promise that more cross-cultural connection could happen through the nexus of literature. Kavala and Nemir, a Turk and a Kurd, brought us—an Armenian family—back to ground zero, where our three communities had once been inextricable, tragic neighbors.

Art cannot fend off bullets and tanks, IEDs or poison gas, but it does fight back—in its stubborn persistence. Poems speak to and for societies and communities and nations—and poets have done this for as long as societies have existed. The texture of any poem in its multifarious ways asserts a human voice and a fundamental fact of human diversity. Poems connect people with a language of insight and human recognition. In some large sense, the aesthetic imagination pushes us toward love. About translating poetry from English into Kurdish and publishing Kurdish books, Kawa Nemir says in an interview from his new home in Amsterdam: “I am like a guerilla. . . . I take my task very seriously and I never quit.” Yeats wrote about how metaphor helped him “hold in a single thought reality and justice.” Poetry asks us to do that—in the cruelty of dark times especially.

I’m holding on to the room where we read poetry on that spring evening in Diyarbakir. I’m holding on to the eyes of Kurds and Armenians, the bright sun-setting light in the room. My mother in her black sweater and silver necklace, poised at a table of journalists. A Kurdish poet. A Turkish visionary. The clatter of silverware and plates. The aroma of coffee.